

Increasing Learning Opportunities, Efficiency and Effectiveness in Policy Governance®

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We hear a lot of talk about becoming more effective and efficient as school districts. We all know we can not lose sight of the students in these discussions. When VSBA conducts a governance study, we look at the three goals of increasing learning opportunities, effectiveness and efficiency. I'd like to discuss how these concepts are addressed in Policy Governance.

Board Ends policies address three things: (1) the difference we want to make [what benefit] (2) in the lives of students [for whom] (3) at some worth or cost. Learning opportunities do not fall into any of these three categories, therefore they are not Ends. We do not exist as school district to provide opportunities, no matter how worthwhile we believe those opportunities to be. We exist so that students actually obtain some set of skills and body of knowledge as a result of their time with us. But we are not after just any skills and knowledge: we are after the ones we set out in our Ends. So while the administration should be very interested in and concerned about the opportunities available to students, the Board should focus on the difference actually made in the lives of students. This is the essence of effectiveness in Policy Governance. Effective schools achieve the Ends they set out to achieve [if we achieve more than that, great, but success is defined up-front in policy].

Efficiency gets at the question of worth, the third and most challenging part of Ends from my perspective. We are investing a substantial amount of time, effort and financial resources in our schools. What have we got to show for it? If we are efficient as school districts, we get our investment's worth in terms of Ends. How do we know this and how can we demonstrate it to our communities and outside regulators?

One measure often used is cost per student. This measure has its own risks, which need to be well thought-out before it is considered valid. That said, however, we could look at what we spend per student and see if our students demonstrate the same or higher level of knowledge and skills as a district that spends a comparable amount. This is comparing ourselves to an external benchmark. It could in comparison to Vermont districts of similar characteristics, all Vermont school districts, a national comparison... this is where the worth discussion gets interesting. What if the district we compare ourselves to has different Ends... wants different things for their students than we do...would that be a legitimate comparison?

Maybe we want to look at an internal benchmark- tracking ourselves over time. Can we keep our per pupil spending constant and get the same or better End results for students? If so, we would be increasing the value of the investment. What if we could reduce our investment and maintain the same level of results for students? This appears to be one goal of the Challenge for Change, and implies we are not currently getting all the value we can out of our investment. How can we know if this is true?

What other benchmarks can we track besides cost per student? Is some other measure of worth more valid? Once again, we find questions that the Board and Superintendent need to wrestle with in Policy Governance, questions with no easy answers. And once again I suggest that these are exactly the questions that we should be wrestling with, and using Board time to do so. It may be that schools today are the target of accusations that we spend too much precisely because we have, as an institution, done a poor job demonstrating the worth question- that our communities are getting results worth the investments made. My hope is that Policy Governance districts can lead the way and propose measures that demonstrate to communities and regulators, as well as to the Board, that we are meeting all three charges outlined in our Ends.